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WHAT TO DO WITH THE SPIRIT-SOUL GAP WHEN FACING TECHNOLOGY INNOVATIONS: ANOTHER CASE FOR A LIMINALITY HOTSPOT? (A SCIENCE ESSAY)

Abstract: The presentation focuses on the challenges to human coping with technology innovations, that were decades ago introduced by Konrad Lorenz in his reflections of the human spirit (Geist) rapidly overtaking the human soul (Seele). Decisions to be done concerning energy resources, transportation, application of nano/bio/info/cogno technologies for human enhancement etc., collide with traditional normative categories concerning ethics, identity, or society. We need to look for alternative ethical approaches, as well as flexible modes of experiencing the dynamics of change introduced by technology innovations. A suitable framework seems to be the concept of a liminality hotspot (Stenner) — situations where people find themselves in a long term (or even permanent) state of 'in-betweenness', 'stuck' in transition. The concept of liminality hotspot offers an exciting approach to the mutual interconnections between technology innovations, creative evolution, societal innovations and cultural evolution.

Key words: *technologies, innovations, liminality, ethics, social theory*

INTRODUCTION

In his book Der Abbau des menschlichen (The waning of humaneness) Konrad Lorenz [1] described in 1983 his worries about the future of out capacity to cope with moral and emotional challenges of our civilized life. His argument is based on a divided conceptualization of human mental capacity: on the one hand we have at our disposal the spirit, our congnitive-rational engine (Geist), and on the other hand we are equipped by our moral and emotional capacity, the soul (Seele). The athropological evolution resulted in a far more massive and rapid advancement of our spirit as compared to our soul. Our soul reached its capacity when people were still living in the tribal society and did not significantly evolve since that time. Thus, not only our emotional capacity is limited to responding to a range of + —

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30–50 people, but our moral competence is primarily committed to this size of social environment with a possibility of direct contact and negotiation.

The spiritual evolution since the first industrial revolution down the our early 21st century has resulted into a state where technologies are fully integrated into our everyday life and constitute objects, activities, knowledge, modes of organizations as well as sociotechnical systems [2]. These technologies are substantial in helping to adapt and control environments, solve (and create) problems, extend human forces and senses, mediate between physical and cultural world. Moreover, technologies are already modes of being and knowing, revealing and framing, and are even getting into the role of social agents. Technologies are a source of our expectations in a plentiful of areas reaching from the lowest level of our existential needs, through our social needs to the highest level — self-actualizationa and self-transcendence (intellectual and spiritual) needs. While we are eager to use them in order to facilitate satisfaction of our needs, we tend to disregard the fact that technologies are real-time experiments, with both intended and unintended consequences. And technologies are producing a broad range of massive emotional response — joy, fear, uncertainty, as well as aspirations — often inappropriate.

WHAT ARE (NEW) TECHNOLOGIES GOOD FOR?

In the context of current mass consumption of technologies, it may be inspirational to introduce at least one example illustrating positive outcomes of a critical approach to (new) technology use. The one I chose comes even from a historical period in which human civilization was still far from being overflooded by technologies. Recently I had the opportunity to admire Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper in Milan's convent Santa Maria delle Grazie — a piece of art of undoubtedly supreme artistic/aesthetic quality. The uncompromising aesthetic level was, however, reached by rejection of the advanced technology of fresco painting (known already in Egypt in the 3rd millenium BC). Why? Leonardo actually did not reject the technology per se; he just refused the restriction that is inherently part of the advaced technology — he refused to paint fast. Declaring that he needs to contemplate in front of the large wall in order to create a piece of art appropriate to the importance of the purpose, he chose the secco technique. Actually, he got in troubles due to the extended time which the creation of the painting took — not because of delay, but because of food and wine that had to be delivered during all the time to his workers/assistants. The genius painting, unfortunately, started to deteriorate just 10 years after finishing. The tempera on gesso, pitch, and mastic „refused" to withstand demanding conditions in the refectory and since then it suffered 5 centuries of interchanging destruction and restoration. The benefit of Leonardo's rejection of an advanced technology gets even more obvious when you stand in the centre of the refectory and after admiring his art you turn around 180 degree and throw a look at the opposite wall. There you can see, but hardly admire, a painting of even larger size, produced in exactly the same period, by Donato da Montofano, an mediocre contemporary master of Leonardo´s. The picture is one of the most significant works by da Montofano and depicts „the day after" — the crucifixion of Jesus

Christ. It is monumental, it impressively fights with perspective, and it is perfectly preserved — because painted with the fresco technology. What a paradox. And what a warning: technologies do not represent values, neither does their use lead necessarily to increase of the value of the outcome.

Therefore, we may rightfully ask: What are (new) technologies good for? What kind of (new) tools do they provide? What kind of (new) practices do they enable? What kind of (new) people are they designing? What kind of (new) society are they empowering? Or what other kind of consequences do they introduce?

While deconstructing the meaning of technologies and mainly new technologies = innovations and their use, the first question that emerges is: Where do they come from? What is their source? Are they driven mainly by demand or by supply?

The demand for technological innovations may stem from certain political or governmental strategies. However, it might by driven also by value preferences, or, at least, by value-informed public decisions. The most utopic is the notion of a technological equipment commissioned by a moral standpoint.

The supply source of technological innovation is in first instance driven by human cognitive instinct. This may be, of course, endorsed by some instruments of institutionalized scientific research. Another source of technological innovations is pure profit motivation. And finally there is still — at least hypothetically — a possibility for a moral reason to create technological innovations — either based on some moral reflection, or pursuing a change in the societal moral status quo.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AS REFLECTED BY SOCIAL THEORIES

Theorising technologies in social sciences and humanities went hand in hand with their rapid development since the first industrial revolution. First contributions may be found in Karl Marx focusing mainly on issues of labour and equality installed by the first industrial revolution of the 19th century. Next significant reflection of technologies may be found in semiotics work of Roland Barthes pursuing for nonverbal and cultural signs of everyday life. His contribution may be expressed in the paraphrase „how things are becoming their meanings". This structuralist-poststructuralist asset was further elaborated into the discursive arena by Michel Foucault who highlighted mainly the power interpretation of objects, spaces and human relations, and their substantial integration into societal systems. An important facilitator of a massive acceptance of technologies should be identified in the so called process of „reification" of human capabilities. As Wendy Stainton Rogers [3] highlights, throughout the development of psychology towards a scientific discipline, one of the central conditions to match with the positivist requirements for being accepted as science, was the „objectification" of human psychic phenomena. Our cognitive and emotional processes got „reified" in order to enable measurement, predictions, categorization of individuals, application of norms and allowing decision-making aimed at „sorting" individuals according to various societal structures, e. g. medical, educational, or legal. Finally, there is the work of Bruno Latour, integrating material-semiotic interpretation of objects and humans in

networks. His actor-network method highlights the social and moral agency of objects. This approach has been subsequently explored, e. g. in the moral inscription method (Jaap Jelsma) seeking to inscribe morality into technological objects [4].

WILL THERE BE A CHANGE OF PARADIGM IN ETHICS?

This brings us to the significance of the ethical platform when reflecting technological innovation. From my view it is highly important to take into account that the moral attitudes and norms are currently catalyzed by the substantial trends in societal/cultural shift. Michel Maffesoli reminds us about three significant characteristics of the current post-modern period: tendency to reject rationality, fatigue from individualism and transformation of social stratification from horizontal to vertical. These processes cannot be detached from the technological advances imposed on us in their digital and global ponderosity. Societal tendencies towards the new forms of tribalism and consumerism jeopardize the Kantian approach focusing on the moral essence of an individual seeking to measure moralite by the good/bad ratio. Therefore new, alternative conceptualizations emerge. The most striking are the affirmative ethics conception (Rosi Braidotti) and ethics of care (Carol Gilligan). In the affirmative ethics approach the „good and bad" divide is subssituted by a less categorical „affirmation and non-affirmation" divide, presuming that this transmutation of moral content may moderate moral polarization and facilitate cooperation in an open and globalized society/culture. The ethics of care approach tries to solve the loss of interest in individual autonomy in substituting the striving for moral essence of the individual by a social-relational conceptualization of moral issues. And other alternative ethical designs triggered by current transformation of our societal and technological environment are to be expected to emerge. Clearly, this development may be seen as a „response" to the frustration expressed by Konrad Lorenz: will the human soul (Geist) remain stuck in the prehistory of our development? Or will it find a new form in which it would be able to assist our decisions about our future?

CONSEQUENCE: PEOPLE IN LIMINALITY HOTSPOTS?

Recently, the work of the anthropologist Van Gennep, focusing on rites of passage and crossing limits of life-stages, was reintroduced to social science. Monica Greco, Paul Stenner and Arpad Szakolczai [5], [6] use it as inspiration for introducing liminality anew — this time, however, not focusing on crossing limits, but on remaining in a liminal situation. The argument is that people still more frequently and in number of contexts enter so called liminality hotspots, situations where they find themselves in a long term (or even permanent) state of 'in-betweeness' or transition. This may be well illustrated by the status of chronic disease, by the requirement of permanent/life-long education, by job instability, by the wide-spread phenomenon of patchwork families, and hundreds of our dimensions of our existence. Liminality hotspots are complex and ambiguous 'threshold zones' characterized by mixture, uncertainty and transformation and by the ambivalence associ-

ated with paradox. Liminality hotspots not only represent extreme requirements from the individual to cope with them, but at the same time exceed the limits imposed by existing institutional and conceptual structures including the legal system. As an effect, liminal experiences are affective and subjectively transformative and are like „the breakdown of order turning into permanence". If reflecting the permanent challenges from the massive stream of technological innovation, we may expect that liminality hospots will soon constitute the majority of our psychosocial environment. Thus we may expect facing a permanent transformation and transmutation of our identity, social structure, and of course, of all the normative systems regulating the public arena. Recently Miroslav Popper [7] associated the liminality challenge to the compelling issue of human enhancement due to application of nano/bio/info/congo (NBIC) technologies. Is the NBIC driven human enhancement potential significantly different from the permanent human enhancement performend during evolution? Will there be a radical change in human nature and when will it occur? What will be the consequences? And what can we do to prevent massive problems on a global scale?

CONCLUSION

The psychosocial consequences of technological innovations are beyond doubt. The current digitalized and globalized civilization, however, requires an intensive search for preventive tools. Social sciences and humanities need to develop a new paradigm. A paradigm that, instead of just reflecting technological progress and developing „adaptive" tools, would take the active role of a value driven partner in negotiating technological innovations. We should not stay in the shade of the evolutionary paradox which Konrad Lorenz helped to understand our frustrations from existence in the modernist era. Our soul (Seele) needs empowerment and inspiration to emancipate from its historical limitation to match the liminality hot (s) pot of our near future.

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